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November 18, 2017

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Our Scriptures were formed through a process of experience, reflection and oral tradition that was eventually written down, all under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Keeping that in mind, we might listen to today's readings as if hearing the oral tradition, as if we were younger disciples listening to our predecessors. Imagine that we're hearing some of the elders who walked with Jesus and heard him weave parables to suit every occasion. These people also knew Paul and the communities he founded.

Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31

Psalms 128

1 Thessalonians 5:1-6

Matthew 25:14-30

Suppose we've been sitting around talking about how things are going in the world. As winter looms, we're discussing the signs that make us think our world may not last too much longer. We know the litany: global warming, nuclear proliferation, lack of response to the plight of refugees, masses of people affected by famine, terrorism. Like the early Christians, we feel that Jesus has gone on too long a journey. Some people think he's coming back soon; others say it's too late.

One of the elders reminds us that Paul went through all of that with his communities. Every time folks like the Thessalonians started questioning whether they could keep on, every time they tried to pin God down to a time schedule, Paul reminded them that nobody knows when the end will come. He told them not to get too worried, but not to get too comfortable either. A disciple sitting in the back mumbles, "God doesn't give us timetables, but possibilities."

With that, another raises an eyebrow and launches into the parable about the master who left his servants in charge of his fortune while he went away. He gave one servant \$5 million, he gave another \$2 million, and a third had to be content with a measly \$1 million.

Then, instead of repeating the whole story, our evangelist turns to us and says: "Why are you sitting around grouching and speculating about things you can't control or even guess at? Have you any idea of what you've been given to work with? What are you doing with your millions?"

At this point, one of the women chimes in and asks, "And what do you think is the point of the story? Do you think it's about how much work the servants did? Do you think it's about the profit they made, the risks they took? No, my friends, it's about what they learned and who they became by doing or by ignoring the master's work."

Then, all the elders start speaking at once — and amazingly, they all agree about the parable's message. The point of the story, they tell us, is that two servants learned to love doing what the master did. They had seen him at work and learned to do it the way he did. They even replicated what he had given them. What a surprise to them when the master hardly paid attention to the money but said, "Well done! ... Now come share my joy."



(Mark Bartholomew)

Our elders would have us understand that that the master in the story isn't really interested in the money and that God, the master, wants us to experience what the business of this life is all about. Servants who imitate his way of working get caught up in his way of living. By the time the master returns, the servants are already sharing in his joy.

Pity those who refuse to get involved. Given much, they choose not to enjoy it. Unlike servants who respond with gratitude for the opportunities they receive, the unwilling see everything with suspicion. Refusing the trust they are given, they put the master's offer in a grave, suffocating their own potential. As those who get involved in the master's work begin to share his joy even before he returns, the others are grinding their teeth in the darkness even before it's time to render an account.

If we want to imagine the daily life of a joyful servant, we can look to our reading from the Book of Proverbs. The person our translation calls a "worthy wife" is literally described as a "woman of strength" or valiant woman. She is the ideal Israelite. She takes all she has been given, does more with it, and dedicates everything she has and is to the good of those who need her. She is a hard worker, but there is no hint that she feels imposed upon or compelled. She enjoys what she does, and that brings joy to others. Following her example, we can learn how to relish the millions of moments that make up the time of our life.

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[Mary M. McGlone, a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet, is writing the history of the St. Joseph sisters in the U.S.]

Editor's note: This Sunday scripture commentary appears in full in NCR's sister publication Celebration, a worship and homiletic resource. Request a sample issue at CelebrationPublications.org.

A version of this story appeared in the **Nov 3-16, 2017** print issue.